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ABSTRACT

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is compatible with cooperative learning as both promote interaction through peer exchange. Cooperative education can take group work one step further and should therefore be incorporated into English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) writing classrooms. In English writing classes in a Japanese junior college, formal and informal types of group work were employed. Students first wrote on a theme for a real purpose--an essay, letter, poster, or article--which is then shared with classmates. Second, the tasks followed recognized cooperative task strategies, such as three-step interview, think-pair-share, roundtable, blackboard share. Through cooperative learning (CL), the teacher carefully plans a theme-based task which takes group work one step further into interdependent learning, where each student is accountable for writing together with his or her peers. By encouraging students to pool knowledge and background resources, they think more critically and synthesize information to develop a more in-depth understanding of a particular topic, as well as the sharing process. To ensure effective group work, the teacher has to monitor groups carefully to keep the conversation in English and be sure that the group does not rely on any single dominant or more advanced student. Teachers who want to maximize cooperative EFL learning need to become well versed in cooperative techniques, as well as language acquisition and group interaction. (Contains 14 references.) (KFT)

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Generating Ideas Cooperatively in Writing Class: Prewriting Activities for Junior College Students

Ann F. V. Smith

Cooperative education has been successful in many countries around the world. I've seen it work in Swedish study circles, in North American cooperative literacy groups, and in Aboriginal education projects. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is compatible with cooperative education as both promote interaction through peer exchange. However, cooperative education can take group work one step further. So why not incorporate cooperative learning in EFL writing classrooms?

Tokushima Bunri University provides an example of how cooperative group work has been used with first and second-year English majors in junior college writing classes. Two modules, a first-year grandparent unit and a second-year smoking unit, will provide illustrations of cooperative writing tasks.

Cooperative learning emphasizes not just the language task but also group collaboration and interdependence, individual accountability, and sharing of responsibility. Cooperative group work requires Japanese students, despite their reticence, to speak English in writing class. It requires the teacher to move from center stage to become a facilitator. However, "there is far more to cooperative

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learning than seating students together. Simply placing students in groups and telling them to work together does not in itself or of itself result in cooperative efforts" (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, p. 5). Therefore, careful preparation and management is necessary.

When planning the cooperative writing modules, language objectives, theme objectives, and learning strategies were considered. A goal of the modules is to help the students work effectively in cooperative groups. Three types of group work were considered. "Formal" cooperative groups, in which students work together for a class (or up to several weeks), as well as "informal" groups, in which students work together for a few minutes or a class period, were incorporated. Cooperative "base" groups were not used in these writing modules as base groups meet together weekly or biweekly throughout a year to assist and encourage learning (see Johnson & Johnson, 1994, and Johnson & Johnson, "What Makes Cooperative Learning Work?" in this volume).

Formal and informal small groups of two to four students are most effective in the modules as my "low-intermediate" learners cannot effectively manage a discussion. The junior college English majors are mostly young women (18 to 20 years) who meet once a week for a 90-minute writing class. On needs assessments, most state they prefer group work to individual work. Heterogeneous, cross-ability groups are productive as more advanced students benefit by explaining vocabulary to others. As the classes are assigned by family name, language skills vary considerably, so even random assignment of groups using number, color, or birthdate produces heterogeneous groups. Sometimes students like to work in homogeneous language groups or free choice groups. However, I usually assign groupings to develop students' cooperative group work skills and to prevent students from always choosing the same partners. The cohesiveness of the members is affected by friendship, status, respect, mutual interests, like/dislike, trust, language level, expectations about who talks, for how long, and in what order (Smith & Mao, 1993; Bell, 1988).

In the writing modules, the theme goals are achieved through selected cooperative tasks which in turn influence the type and amount of group interaction. Firstly students write on a theme for a real purpose—an essay, a letter, a poster, or an article—which is shared with classmates rather than just the teacher. They learn different patterns of rhetorical organization (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) and develop various writing styles appropriate for different readers and various occasions. The practical boundaries of the task, such as the due date and the length of an assignment, affect students' pace and time management. A short piece, due within a week, will require a much narrower, more specific topic than a longer project.

Secondly, the tasks follow recognized cooperative task strategies, such as those for EFL by Kagan and Kagan (1994) and Olsen and Kagan (1992). These

include the "three-step-interview," "think-pair-share," "roundtable," and "blackboard share," (Kagan & Kagan, 1994, p. 14) which I elucidate in the writing modules. In addition, one activity sheet per group and an open-ended or "ill-structured" task (Cohen, 1994) rather than one with a "right" answer will ensure greater collaboration.

Students need theme language as well as interactive language to function in English in cooperative groups. Basic classroom English (Chinen, 1995) prepares students to interact with the teacher, but this is insufficient. Olsen (1992) and Kagan (1994) have identified extensive language requirements for both task completion and group maintenance.

My students use a language sheet providing easy phrases, for asking for opinions, explanation, or clarification, giving information, agreeing, disagreeing, praising, and so on. This language sheet has proved helpful especially for turn taking, asking for others to contribute, and clarification strategies which are essential for group functioning. However, keeping Japanese students speaking in English in writing class is problematic. In my first year classes, students often use Japanese, but they record and read in English. Second year students manage in English, but may lapse into Japanese when I am observing other groups. This is an ongoing problem.

Once the writing task is set, the teacher plans the lesson and arranges the room to provide a relaxed, supportive environment. In class, she introduces and justifies the cooperative writing unit, explains the goals and collaboration necessary to complete the task, and groups the students. She actively supports the groups, observes the groups, monitors to ensure all students participate and no one dominates, encourages silent students, notes interaction, and adjusts timing as necessary. For language development, she listens and records the common language errors, models correct forms, prompts, paraphrases incomplete or intelligible questions, contributes vocabulary and collects it on the board. To move the task along, she intervenes, clarifies the task, carries ideas and information from one group to another, questions, summarizes, and sometimes joins a group as a participant (Smith & Mao, 1993; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). In addition, she provides positive feedback and encouragement, and adds a sense of humor.

Using Cooperative Techniques for EFL Writing

Cooperative learning is compatible with the process approach to writing as collaborative writing techniques allow students to share ideas and experiences that help them develop their own writing process. Initially my students expect individual assignments and focus more on grammatical competence than on content or process. Yet grammatical competence is but one of the communica-

tive competencies that Scarcella and Oxford (1992) apply to writing proficiency. They show discourse competence in cohesion and coherence; sociolinguistic competence in rhetoric and boundaries; and strategic competence in the writing process are equally important (1992, p. 118). This strategic competence in the writing process enables students to develop a process to suit their own or group style and the required task.

The writing process—prewriting, writing, rewriting, and editing— stresses a dynamic interaction between the writer, reader, and a meaningful text. It has deeply influenced both L1 and more recently L2 writing, but research has shown that L2 writing is definitely more challenging (Raimes, 1995; Zamel, 1987). Silva (1993, p. 668) reviewed many studies concluding: "Though general composing process patterns are similar in L1 and L2, it is clear that L2 composing is more constrained, more difficult, and less effective." Also the composing process is not always linear and may become more circular as the text and topic develop.

The thematic modules introduced here use an umbrella process approach. A series of tasks extend from the central theme like spokes in an umbrella; each task addresses the theme from a different point in more depth to recycle and build information and vocabulary. Students cooperate throughout and synthesize the information into a final piece—like the umbrella fabric. Journals are required for regular writing practice. This umbrella process is, in my experience, more effective with unskilled Japanese writers who need "more time for everything" (Raimes, 1995, p. 250) and often hand in the first draft as the final draft with only grammatical changes.

The Grandparent Module

In this four-part, six class-hour, grandparent theme-based module, students towards the end of the first year sketch the personality and lifestyle of a grandparent. They also describe a specific visit to a grandparent in a letter to a classmate, who then replies. Then students as a group plan and then individually write an essay. The grandparents theme was chosen not only because it introduces a respected family member, but also as it can integrate other issues such as societal change, population trends, accommodation, the treatment of seniors, and so on. The students develop theme language as well as interactive language to function in English in cooperative groups and in individual or whole group activities.

The initial pre-writing can be divided into three sections: the boundaries of a piece of writing (identified under task criteria); the gathering of information; and the synthesis of information and ideas into an outline or plan. Although young Japanese college students have limited knowledge and experience to bring to their writing, they can all brainstorm information about their grandparents. Native speakers can quickly generate relevant information in this way, but EFL students need training, practice, and enough time to do the same. Murray

(1984, p. 20) stresses the advantages of "brainstorming": "Brainstorming shows me what I know, what I need to know and what the connections are between what I know and what I do not know."

The usual way to record such information in both Western and Japanese culture is to make a list or flow chart, which can be elaborated with numbers, letters, or full sentences. However, the web is a popular alternative with my EFL students; the broad topic "grandparents" sits at the centre and sub-topics, such as age, hobbies, lifestyle, or pets, radiate out becoming more complex and detailed. Key words can be circled, vocabulary expanded, and lines can connect ideas. A tree can also be used with the trunk divided into grandmother and grandfather and branches which subdivide general points into details twigs.

After an initial individual brainstorming on a web, students form groups and ask questions—who, what, when, where, why, how—in order to build the grandparent cluster. They are reminded to use the language sheet to assist them and to take turns recording their web onto an overhead plastic transparency. Then, as an essential component of "cooperative brainstorming," students present their transparency to the large group. The other students individually record new ideas and vocabulary in their journals and are encouraged to see similarities and trends.

Individual free writing proved slow and tedious with my first-year college students so the grandparent module now expands the topic with a written conversation "roundtable" (or pair exchange) to expand the topic. Using journals and the vocabulary lists, each student writes a question asking about grandparents. Students pass their journals around the circle, respond, and write a new question ready for another exchange. Finally in a new small group, partners share their journals, and as a group write a paragraph about grandparents using (and editing) sentences from the written conversation. For homework each writes a personal grandparent paragraph in her journal that will be shared and peer edited the next week. For peer editing, first they read their paragraphs aloud to the group. Then together they edit one paragraph at a time with !! for a very good sentence and ** for interesting words. Then they mark ?? for anything unclear, ^^ for tell me more and PP for a specific problem. Finally they check the subject-verb agreement and hand in the paragraph.

During a "think-pair-share" cooperative task on day two, students begin to recount a recent visit to a grandparent by individually brainstorming the questions: who (people), what (event), where (location), when (date), why (purpose), how, and what happened onto a worksheet. Then each interviews a partner, records the details in her journal and reports the findings to a group. A mini-lecture introduces the format for formal and friendly letters, and student groups "brainstorm" words they know for greetings, openings, closings, and salutations on a worksheet. Then each group "blackboard shares" one item for each category.

Students continue the "think-pair-share" by pair planning a letter in their journals. They jointly prepare an introduction to set the scene, plan the visit (in the past tense) and add a closing about future plans. Each student then individually describes her own visit to her grandparent's house as part of a letter written in her journal to a randomly assigned classmate (names are drawn from a hat). I keep an accurate list of partners to avoid future confusion.

In the third class, students bring their draft letters to share in class and they peer edit in small groups using the same criteria as for the paragraph. Then they copy the letter neatly, fold it, and address it to the chosen classmate. Letters go into the mail bag and a student delivers them. Each student writes a reply including three relevant questions asking for details about the partner's visit. The letter writing was popular and generated great interest. The letters were photocopied for marking.

Next in a "three-step-interview," students individually fill in, as best they can, a fact sheet asking for more detailed information on their grandmother. For homework, step two, they visit or by telephone interview Grandma, and complete the fact sheet. We often neglect interviews, thinking EFL students have inadequate English. Although interviews with expert native speakers are best as they can provide excellent real world speaking and listening practice, first language interviews, as with Grandma, can stimulate student motivation, produce interesting insights and renew ties. In some oral cultures, this can also legitimate traditional mechanisms for passing information from elders.

In the fourth class, in an animated third step, each student interviews two other group members about their grandmothers. Then the group jointly completes one worksheet with a series of sentences comparing the grandmothers' childhood and youth to their own. Initially students need prompting as they find the first few questions are quite difficult as they must combine their knowledge of the grandmothers, women's roles, Japanese history, and so on. The facilitator needs to monitor the group work carefully to ensure the worksheet is circulating and all are involved. Finally, the group (taking turns) presents the completed sentences on a transparency.

In preparation for the final essay, the teacher should review essay format with the students who then "group plan" an essay about grandmother. In pairs, they do an open-ended sentence combining activity about a grandmother which stresses the importance of compound sentences and coherence. Students individually write their essays following their group plan. Finally, they peer edit their essays in groups and combine some of their simple sentences into compound sentences. They revise the essays for homework ready to hand in for final marking. In hindsight the five-paragraph essay in this unit was too long and either a three-body paragraph poster or a four-paragraph essay would be more suitable.

The essays can also be published in a booklet on grandmothers. Learner teams can be responsible to prepare the covers, the introduction, the table of contents, and arrange the items. Another group can copy, fold, and distribute the booklet.

Conclusion

Through cooperative learning, the teacher carefully plans a theme-based task which takes group work one step further into interdependent learning where each student is accountable for writing together with her peers. By encouraging students to pool knowledge and background resources, they think more critically and synthesize information to develop a more in-depth understanding of a particular topic, the language necessary for writing about the topic, and the sharing process.

To ensure cooperative group work, the facilitator has to monitor the groups' functioning carefully, and encourage students to collaborate and use their language skills rather than to rely on the dominant or more advanced student. Students need to understand the process of sharing learning is equally as important as completing the task, just as the process of writing and editing is as important as handing in the final product. Students soon realize that any student can be called on to answer and, as assignments are handwritten, that the teacher can recognize different handwriting. They also need reminding to stay in English and to keep the group functioning effectively.

The modules presented here combine an umbrella process which addresses the writing theme from various angles through cooperative tasks. This offers an alternative which stresses real content and increases the amount and variety of meaningful information transmitted through sharing and oral interaction. The pre-writing component is essential for EFL writing students to develop ideas and vocabulary on a topic. It links well with cooperative group tasks even at high beginner to low intermediate levels. It helps ensure success and build both individual confidence and group responsibility and trust.

Teachers who want to maximize cooperative EFL learning need to become well versed in cooperative techniques as well as language acquisition and group interaction. They need to invest time not only to develop their own tasks, but also to seek writing texts which offer materials that can be adapted to cooperative techniques. They need to encourage learners, but also need to monitor the groups, reflect, and adjust future activities. Introducing cooperative group work is a gradual process as Japanese students will always value individual assignments. But a cooperative, collaborative classroom can include individual and large group activities, can inspire the content, and greatly improves the final product in writing class.

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